

COLOR CODED

A TRON FANZINE



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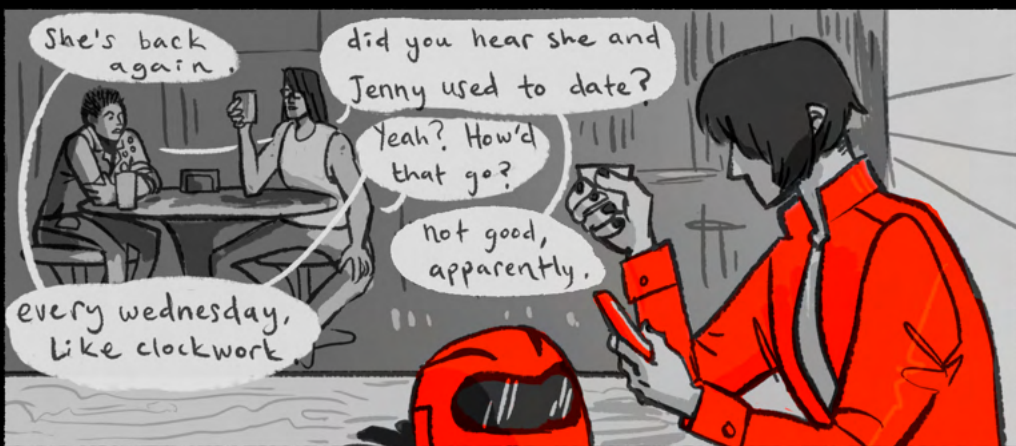
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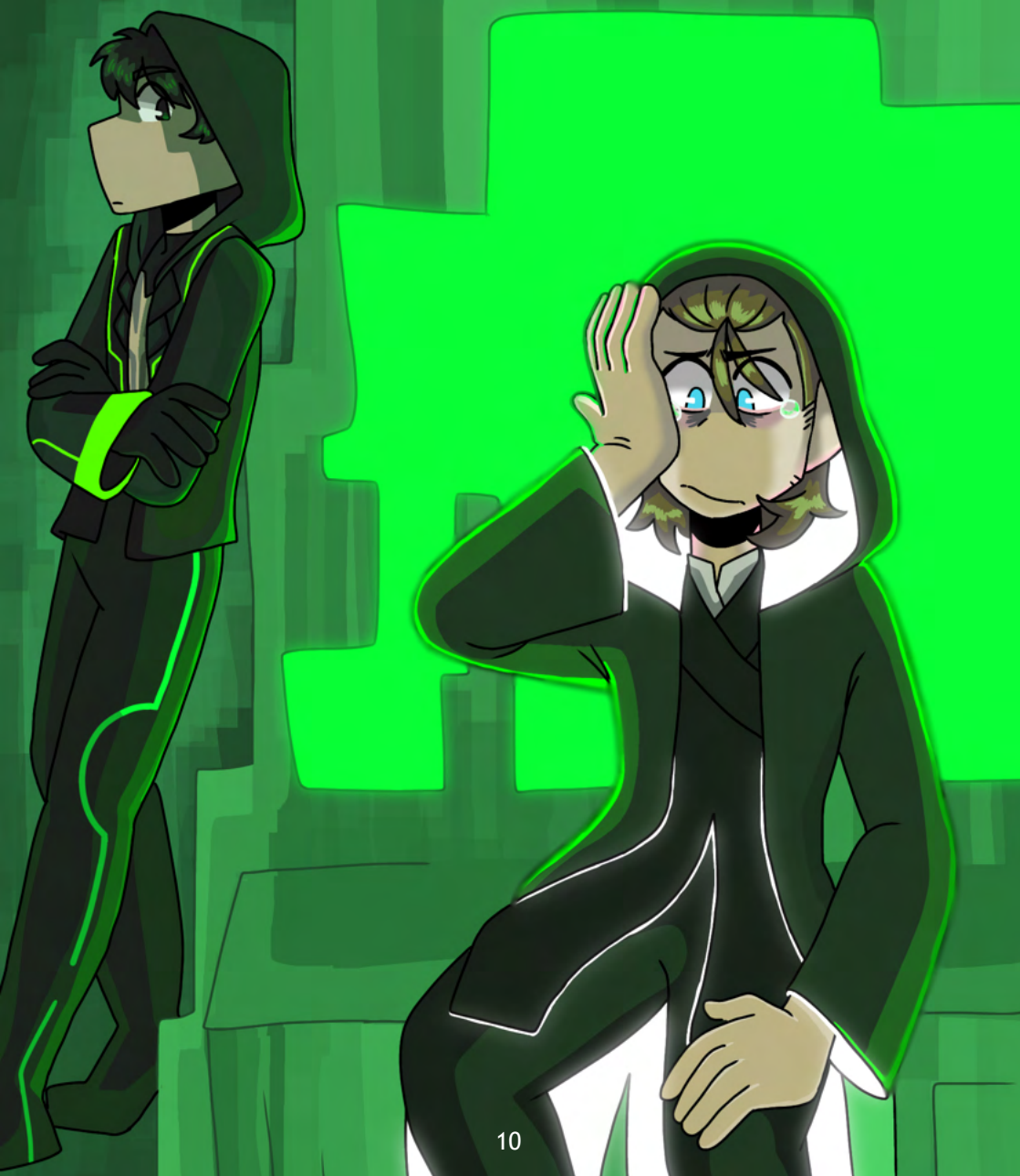












VIRIDESCENT

Beck makes Paige feel like a whole new program by letting her embrace an outdated version of herself.

@InvincibleInck



“My date idea was better,” said Paige.

Despite the approaching downcycle, Argon’s pool hall was animated and torrid. It buzzed with voltaic circuits, mumbled voices, and the hum of music. Beck and Paige strode shoulder-to-shoulder into the playing field. There was a gaggle of civilians lounging around a bench, and when Paige breezed by their game, they did a double-take. Citizens socializing with the Occupation was an unusual sight. Not unheard of, but unusual.

“Yeah, well, skydiving from a military chopper is kinda hard to top,” said Beck, grabbing a rack from the wall as he passed. Turning midstep, he walked backwards to the nearest table, eyes never leaving hers. “Besides, it would do you some good to get out more. Have some normal fun. Do what regular programs do.”

“I can be normal,” she protested.

Beck let out a snort before pivoting to the free table. He set up the rack in the center and watched as the billiards materialized inside. With a skip in his step, he went back to the wall and retrieved a pair of purple cues. The soft glow against his skin evoked feelings in Paige that were both welcome and inconvenient.

“Would you like to go first, *Commander Paige*?”

He extended an arm to offer her a cue. She snatched the pole from his grip, ignoring the way her circuits sang at the contact. Wriggling in place, she aimed the shaft at the triangle, then gave her elbow a gentle jerk. She broke at an angle and the balls went spinning in all directions. One bounced from the rest and rolled into the closest pocket.

A slow clap sounded behind her. “Not bad, sir. I believe it is your turn again.”

“Oh shut up,” she said, hiding her smile behind an arm.

Shaking with laughter, Paige misjudged the force and distance behind her second stroke. It scratched the surface of the table and sent the cue ball careening into space. She swore as she straightened.

“Language, Commander~” Beck plucked up the cue ball and bounced it merrily in his palm.

“Frag you.”

Far from being intimidated, Beck just chuckled. He went to a side rail, assumed the stance, and swung with expert precision. There were a couple quiet clicks before a pair of balls sank into pockets. Paige blinked and rounded the perimeter of the table, half-convinced that her eyes were deceiving her. She processed for a few more nanos before speaking.

“You cheated.”

He shot her a wink, rolling his pole into the other hand. “No tricks! Just skill. We mechanics know how to work well with our hands.”

Paige’s only reply was a theatrical sniff.

They spent the next several nanos just cleaning the table, exchanging jibes like they were jump shots. Time and time again Beck proved to be the more experienced player. Sometimes he went on the defensive, blocking her at every turn. Other times he pocketed billiards that appeared in the most impossible positions. More than once, Paige got the distinct impression that she was being played with.

About halfway through the game, Paige took her place at the side rail to try for a ball in the kitchen end. Though her eyes were trained on the biliard, her focus was locked on the body behind her. A sort of electric tingling spread from the tips of her fingers to her toes. Thinking fast, she bowed to hide her expression, and the current faded. The ball went wide and she dropped her head.

“I... haven’t done this for a while.”

”It shows.” Beck snorted, only to duck under Paige’s cue. “Kidding, *kidding*-”

High peals of laughter filled the room. All around them, patrons turned from their games to watch. Paige paid them no mind.

He had the most wonderful laugh.

Once recovered, Beck said, “Y’know, I haven’t done this in a while, either.”

“Really? But you’re so good at it.”

“Not this,” he said, before winding his hand with hers. There was a squeeze for emphasis. “*This*.”

Paige spared a glance at their intertwined fingers, hastily burying the impulse to squeeze back. She broke the hold and drifted to the other end, ridding herself of the jitters.

Perhaps a change in topic was in order.

“You know, I always wondered... How did a lowly mechanic learn to fight in the Games?”

“I don’t know. How did a medic become a Commander?” Beck countered.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got time.”

For a while Paige considered him. Then she closed her eyes. Her past was rather... *dramatic*, and she didn’t want to burden him with it. Not on the second date, anyway.

“I used to run a clinic in Bismuth with a couple other medics.”

“What happened?”

Her eyes opened. “Rogue programs. No survivors. Needless to say, the clinic doesn’t exist anymore.”

She’d censored much of the event, but this conversation was dour enough already. Today was supposed to be *fun*.

Paige couldn’t see Beck’s expression, but when he spoke, it was with a sotto voice.

“I’m sorry.”

Her answering shrug was more stiff than she would’ve liked. The ISOs’ betrayal was a wound that still hadn’t healed—perhaps would never heal.

“Not your fault,” she said, bending low over the table.

This next shot was a tricky one, best approached at a bank. Lips pursed in concentration, Paige lined up, then let her cue loose. The wrong billiard ricocheted off the railing and sank into a pocket with a dissatisfying ‘thump’. She saw it derezz shortly afterwards, with Beck watching all the while. He planted his pole into the floor and pretended to lean on it.

“What are you doing?” Paige couldn’t resist asking.

“Trying to imagine you in medical circuits.” His roaming eyes came to rest on her face. “I think you’d look good in green.”

Again, the buzzing sparked through her circuits. She rushed a casual hand across her bangs, tucking a loose lock behind her ear.

“I look good in everything.”

He huffed a laugh. “Fair enough.”

Somewhere in the depths of her files Paige extracted the memory of a young medic, bright-eyed, naïve-faced, and blazing with emerald light lines.

“My hair was awful back then, but the green... The green did look great. I kinda miss it.”

“I’d like to see that sometime,” he said.

Paige stared, staggered by the emotion etched in his face. In an instant she knew he was being sincere. Never before had a program expressed interest in her life before the Occupation. She’d tried to shelve the memories, to move on as a new, more powerful person. And yet, she still composed music, still kept a monome hidden in her quarters.

She tipped her head toward the table. “It’s your turn, mechanic.”

Neither one of them moved. The air between them seemed to crackle. She roved her eyes over his body, taking in the teal light lines and the chiselled contours.

“Only if you go red for a bit,” she said, at last. The words came out before she could stop them.

Beck seemed to crash for a nano, eyes widening by a fraction before he let out a delayed laugh.

“What?”

“I’ll let you see me in green if you give red a try,” she said with an upturn of her chin.

He scratched at his jaw and set his shoulders resolutely. “Hoho, are we bargaining now?”

”Maybe.”

“How about this. Whoever wins the next round gets to change the other’s render. Say, for one day-cycle?”

“Quarter-cycle.” She tapped his chest and he backed up, blushing pink along his circuits. A smirk prickled along her lips. “You’re on.”

“You’re just saying yes because you don’t want to finish the game,” said Beck. His chest was puffed and his crooked smile seemed especially teasing. “Admit it, I have the superior skills.”

She shrugged, fighting to stifle giggles. Despite her best efforts, a single snicker slipped out. Somehow this program was able to burrow under her skin, cause cracks in her carefully constructed render, make her feel like... *Paige*. Not the Commander, and not even the Medic.

Just Paige.

“What can I say? I guess I’m just green with envy.”

“Oh-” He reeled back with a hand clutching his core. “Oh, that was terrible.”

“Absolutely awful,” she agreed.

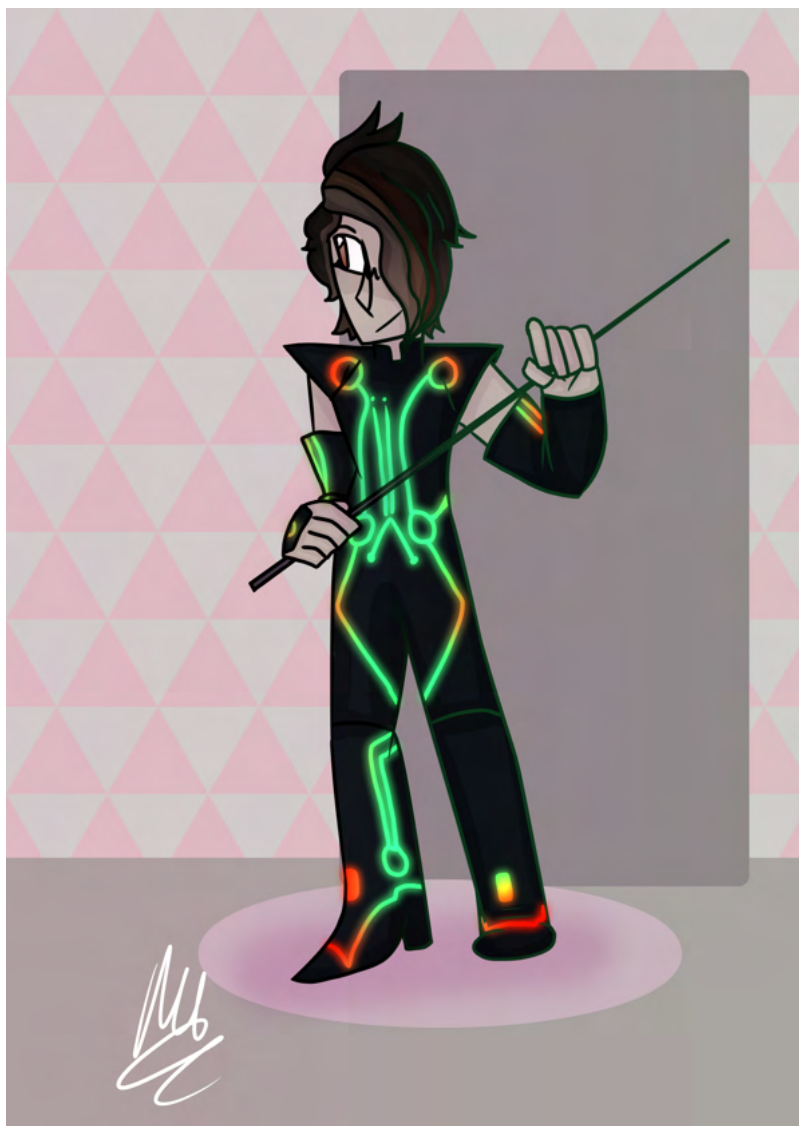
After clearing the board, Beck set up a new game under snooker settings. The triangle rack was returned to the table and fifteen billiards took shape inside, with others appearing at various points around the table. It was a fresh game. A clean slate.

Beck went first this time and immediately struck a ball into scoring position. And again, and again. Each flash of light left Paige a little more amused than before.

“Show off,” said Paige.

Arching a playful brow, Beck rose from the rail. Paige felt the provocation in his gaze. He was challenging her—in more ways than one.

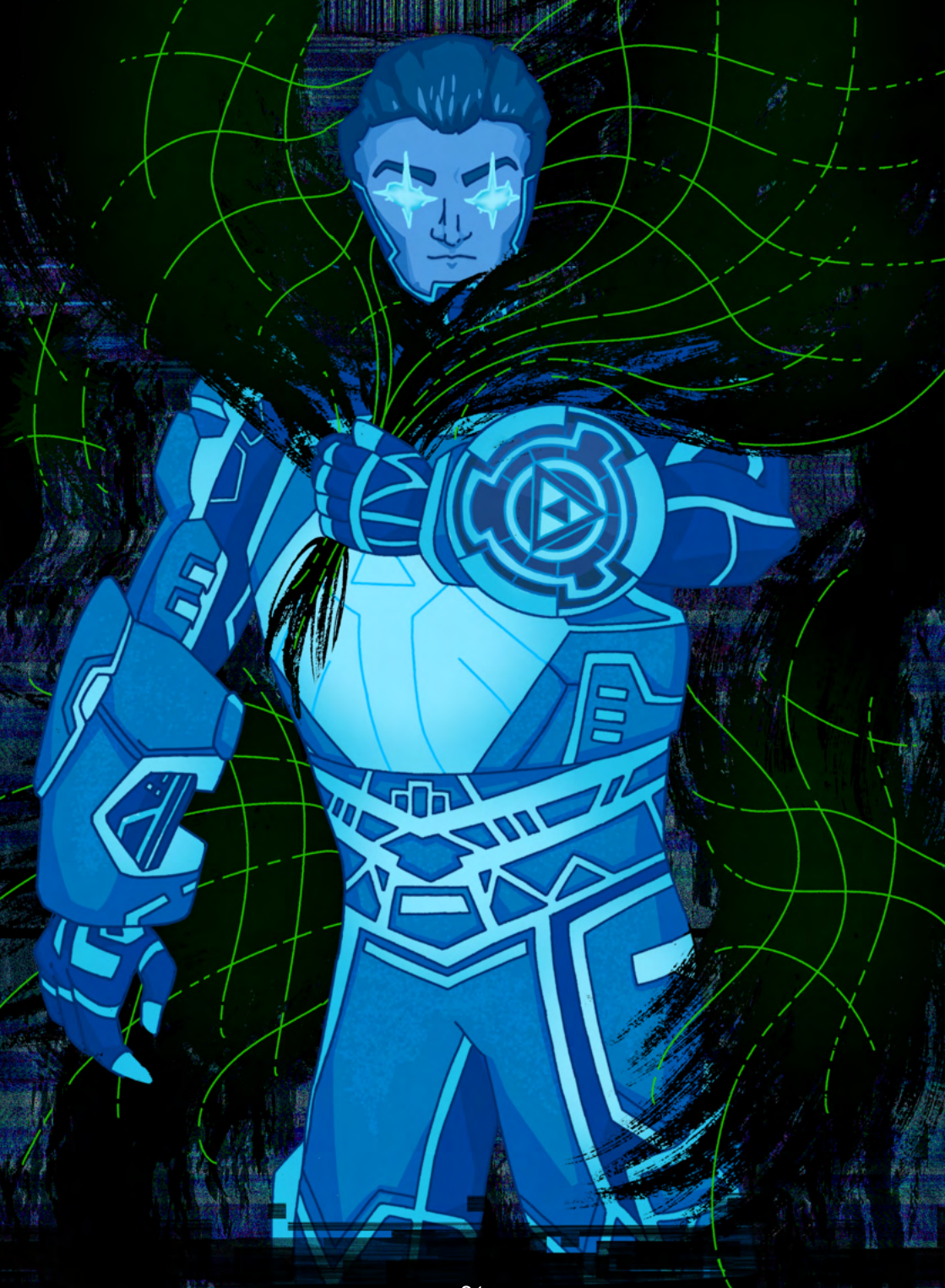
“You think you got better?”



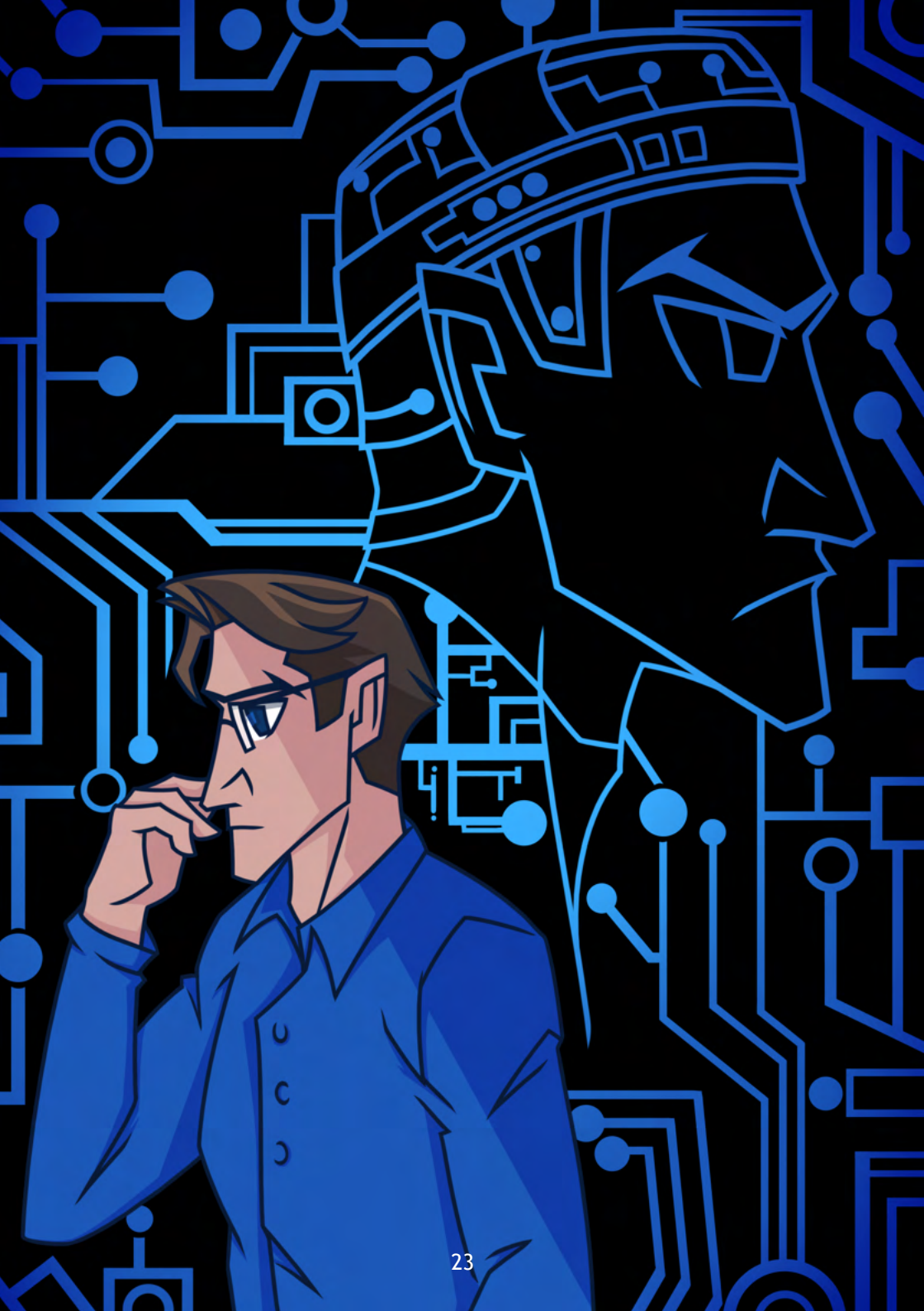




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DCAHS







CLOSE MY EYES AND DISAPPEAR

*"What I wanted was to fall asleep;
close my eyes and disappear."
- Eurydice (Hadestown)*

@Krisdaughter_of_athena



Argon was fighting back. At last.

The thought should soothe him, maybe inspire him. His greatest troubles were now over. His friends would be at his side, and more were sure to follow. They could take the fight straight to Clu!

The thought should give him hope.

Instead, he feels...Nothing.

He's always felt his emotions vividly, 'wore his heart on his sleeve' as Tron would say. Yet ever since Able...well something had shut down on that dock. Broken. As he had fled the angry crowd throwing insults, the crashing emotions warring in him were smothered until the only thing he could feel was the rushing wind pass him by.

At first, the Nothing was a comfort. It muffled the cries of something now foreign, soothed the ache. It had carried him through Tron's near brush with death, and the blame thrown at him couldn't hurt him if he couldn't feel it.

But now, he's supposed to be *happy*. The Nothing hangs around his neck like a weighted chain. Would it be easier to let it pull him under? To dig for more comfort in the Nothing?

He ditched the thought as soon as it came, tossing it to the wind as he sped into the Outlands. No, he's supposed to be *happy*; Tron had given his rare pride to Beck. He *should* be proud and hopeful and *happy*...

Beck slowed as the hideout came into sight. He came to a stop, staring up at the mountain. There, Tron was waiting for him. He could probably see him.

The thought made his breath hitch as the Nothing clutched tighter around his neck. Despite it, fear gave a weak but valiant push that was enough to make his hands shake and to overwhelm his mind. His legs urged him to run, but to where? Tron was waiting for him ahead. The city waited for its Renegade behind him. He was cornered, and spiraling...

His body made the decision for him. His hands gripped the bars of his bike and snow kicked up behind him as he took off. The bike passed the hideout and rode further into the Outlands. Tron is sure to give him an earful for that, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He didn't even know where he was going, now that he thought about it. And yet he *kept* going, wind whistling by.

He finally came to a stop when the snow had long disappeared. Stiffly, he climbed off the back and turned to glance behind him. The hideout was long gone, barely a speck on the horizon. Surprisingly, the thought loosened the chain around his neck enough for him to take a deep breath. Tron couldn't reach him here... wherever 'here' was.

This probing thought allowed him to turn back forward. The snow was long gone, giving way to the dark ground beneath him. Beyond that though was a small hill dotted with something he hadn't seen since his younger cycles, long before a revolution was ever a trouble.

Gridflowers.

Able had taken him and his friends to a field full of them, back closer to the center of the city. He led them through the field, pointing out the beauty and attention the Creator had given even the smallest things. No doubt the white petals had been long crushed when the Occupation claimed Argon.

How odd...to even think about such a trivial thing when far worse had happened.

Still, he disembarked his bike and approached the hill. Unlike the ones in the city, the petals of each flower were soft indigo. Nowhere as bold, but just as beautiful. He was careful in his steps, trying hard to disturb as few as possible. As he reached

the top of the hill, he could see the indigo dots across the long valley.

Something about it loosened the Nothing just a twitch more and he found himself sinking down to the ground. They were soft beneath him, forgiving of his presence. One even stood tall, inviting itself to be picked by gentle hands. Beck held it close, slowly examining the flower. The petals blossomed out.

“The best time to see them is when they are in full bloom.” Able had explained so long ago. They had spent so long at the garden that he had been carrying Bodhi as the younger program dozed against his shoulder. Zed, Mara, and Beck had been staring up at him with wide eyes. *“They’re a sign of love in full bloom.”*

“What does that mean?” Beck had asked at the time. *“How can a flower love?”*

Able had laughed and ruffled his hair. *“They can’t. But each was designed with a love, an intent. The programs of this garden tend to them with this same love. And I love you four just the same. That will never change.”*

The flower began to shake. Or at least it must be the flower. It was hard to see exactly through the tears in his eyes. Something...not the Nothing, but a *Something*, was breaking open in his chest. With a gasp, the chain of the Nothing shattered and a sob escaped despite himself.

Able was *gone*! Cyrus had been right; someone wouldn’t make it out alive. But why *him*?

There was no answer. The wind that had long died away slowly breezed by, drying his tears on his cheeks. He bowed his head, accidentally crushing the flower in his hand as he cradles his head. The flowers gave their best comfort, gently urged by the wind, but did not stop the young revolutionary. He needed this. No program can find comfort in Nothing, after all.

He lost track of how long he was crying, only that the wind was softer when he finally ran out of tears. The ones that dried to his face were stiff, more sensitive to the caress of the wind. Unconsciously, he closed his eyes and leaned

into it.

I love you just the same. And that will never change.

He knew it was just his imagination, but Able's soft words on the wind still bring him comfort. Sure enough, when he opened his eyes again, he was alone with the flowers. With a heavy sigh, he laid back into the flowers. They were soft beneath his back and grouped around his face as he found himself staring up at the sky.

The sky was a near indigo, a similar shade to the flower. Oddly, the thought brought him comfort. Something was balancing within him again. The weight was still there, but it was more manageable, similar to what he felt after Bodhi. Perhaps Able will sit beside Bodhi now, deep within him. And he can't say that he minded.

The battle has been won. Able would be proud that he knew deep within him. But there was still the war ahead. Tron was right; even with their new recruits, things were going to get worse. Someday, they would catch Clu's full attention, and then what?

Beck knew he couldn't be sure, but the indigo tinges of hope still settled within him. It gently urged him to peace, to a random, illogical, and still all the more hopeful thought.

Someday, when this war is over, there will be a garden of indigo flowers. They will be for Able.

The thought brought a smile to his face, followed by a yawn. Now that he had no more tears, sleep gently pulled him down. He didn't fight it. He could have this moment, even if only for now.





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JACKET

Flynn gets distracted during a simple grocery shopping trip.

@Quanty.27/Quantum27



“Oh gee, I sure do *Love* the cheese aisle,” Flynn said with an overdramatic flourish of his hand.

Alan threw him a raised eyebrow. Flynn huffed, “We’ve been here for like twenty minutes- how interesting can cheese even be?”

“Flynn, it’s been barely two.”

“*Fwynn, it’s been bawewy twwooo*,” he mockingly mirrored.

“Oh, you childish—”

Alan reached over the shopping car with one of his arms to try and swat at him.

“Alright, you two.” Lora’s voice made both of their heads snap to attention to look at her. She was holding a block of cheese in each hand. “Good. Flynn- if you want to wander you’re free to, no one’s stopping you.”

Alan sighed and gestured to Flynn frantically. “If he manages to lose himself in the store and we have to try and find him for

twenty minutes—”

“*Alan.*”

The man’s hands froze in midair.

Flynn snickered to himself behind a hand.

Lora shot him a look. “He’s still right. We need to get out of here eventually.”

“We could just leave him here if we need to.”

“Hey!” Flynn made a sound of indignation, but laughed a little all the same.

Lora rolled her eyes at their antics before setting a block down. “Go on, get out of here before you make Alan blow a fuse.”

Alan started to retort, but Flynn heard none of it as he made his retreat out of the grocery section of the store. *He* didn’t need groceries, after all.



There was One Problem. Without the opportunity to bother Alan or Lora, Flynn was left alone with his thoughts. And lately they’d been a bit more unpleasant than he’d like to admit.

Specifically his thoughts had kept drifting to his jacket.
The Jacket.

Which he was wearing right now—the iconic red striped sleeves and everything. Which was part of the problem. Now when he looked at them all he could see was MCP guards. It sent feelings of unwelcome static throughout his joints whenever he saw it now. Which was ridiculous because this was *his* jacket. The Jacket.

He'd actually been thinking of wearing a leather jacket more often- but that laced a certain element of *class* that came with The Jacket. A little less color, a little less spark.

So naturally, this was a good opportunity to go looking for a new jacket. Granted, there were never many good options that *general stores*, but it couldn't hurt to just check.



“Why are ‘men’s sections’ of clothing stores always so... boring,” he scoffed to himself as he thumbed through a rack of boring gray jackets.

Gendered clothes as a concept were already boring as well. It made no sense to him; there was no reason not to just organize things by sizes rather than gender. He paused as his hand came upon a shirt that was obviously left by someone who had put it on the rack simply to get rid of it rather than actually putting it back where it belonged.

He pulled it out with a soft snort; the shirt was an ugly yellow with only the word VIOLET on it. There had to be a joke here. The letters themselves weren't even purple, they were just—

Flynn rolled his eyes as it clicked into place. Complementary colors. Of course.

He went to put it back before stopping mid-motion. Then he held it up to himself. The material felt nice, and the shirt was funny in a stupid way.... The only question was if it fit. It took all of two seconds to make a decision.

The changing rooms were near the center of the jungle that was the clothes section of the store, meeting in the middle of what was divided as ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ (despite how utterly ridiculous Flynn thought the concept was). He made his way over to it, walking a little faster but keeping his eyes peeled at the clothes

around him as well. Just in case there was something else that was special.

He was about a stride away from the door to one of the rooms when he spotted it.

The bright violet fabric drew his breath away and made his feet move without even meaning to. He could only see a sleeve and a hint shoulder but he somehow knew before even got to it that it was going to be his.

The fabric was cool against his fingers, the bright purple material wrinkling in response. If he stared at it long enough it might even burn his eyes. He drew it out from the rack gingerly, eyes examining every detail.

The jacket was. Perfect.

In a way he couldn't even possibly describe. It just was.

Flynn blinked as his eyes caught on the tag of the jacket. A reasonable price for a jacket like this but the—the marking of it being for the women's part of the department sent a dash of irritation that started at his chest and through his entire body for a moment. Then he closed his eyes and sighed. Upon opening them again he sent a definite glance towards the changing room doors.

He knew what needed to be done.



“Where *is* he...? I swear this happens everytime we go shopping with him.”

Flynn smirked as he heard Alan's voice. He'd made his way back around after checking out and getting his new outfit.

“I'm sure we'll see him soon, Alan. Don't worry too much about it.”

“Lora, I’m not worryinnnnGGg—ugh—! *Flynn!*”

Flynn’s smirk split into a smile at the way Alan had jumped at Flynn, smacking him on the back before putting an arm around the man’s shoulders. Alan rolled his eyes but didn’t move it away.

“See, I told you.” Lora smiled, and Flynn watched as she took a moment to look at his outfit and then pointedly decided not to mention it.

Alan, on the other hand... “What. Are. You. Wearing?”

Flynn laughed as he withdrew his arm, taking a step back to do a small spin so Alan could get a full impression of what he was wearing. The yellow shirt with the color-joke, the New Jacket in its violet glory, blazing brightly enough to make the other programmer squint, the Old Jacket tied around his waist, and to top it off he’d bought some new matching purple shoelaces to put in his tennies.

“Alan Bradley, I’m wearing the best outfit you will ever see.”

“And how do you know that?” Alan asked dryly.

“Ha! Because. *I’m* the one wearing it.” Flynn’s smile turned devilish. “And I make *every* outfit look this good.”



IT'S DEFINITELY NOT A NASHVILLE PARTY

Flynn has some ideas for Tron's outfit on the Grid. Tron is not impressed.

@mousewritings



“Flynn,” Tron says. It’s so simple and yet it carries so much. Like, “Flynn, there are more important things to work on.” Or, “Flynn, the Arena’s not complete yet.” Or even, “Flynn, there’s still that glitchy area in the middle of the city that makes anyone who goes near it temporarily lose their limbs and some of the weirder programs keep going there on purpose.” So many meanings in just one syllable.

Flynn ignores them, though. Turns his smile a bit brighter as his eyes go up and down Tron’s suit. “Do a turn?”

Tron does. He also lets out a sigh and says, “Flynn—seriously.” And that means something more along the lines of, “The next time gridbugs decide to attack, I may or may not save you.” He doesn’t even understand the appeal of having more than one outfit, anyway. In the old system, he’d simply worn the one suit. Every day. All the time. And it had been fine.

But he’s not gonna lie. This suit is sleek. Mysterious in its minimalism. And there’s something intriguing in the way his light lines are little more than suggestions scattered across his front. It’s for an entirely different function from the one he performed in the ENCOM system, he thinks. Something much more... covert.

“Looking good, man,” Flynn says when Tron faces him again. His grin is Way Too Wide, and it almost makes Tron forget about the approximately thirty million other things demanding their attention. “What do you think of it?”

“I like it,” Tron replies, dry in his honesty. “But it’s... missing something.”

Flynn snorts. “Anything, you know, specific?”

Specific. Tron tries to find the right words and can’t. The thoughts he’s trying to pinpoint come as feelings, those odd little parts of his processes: a sort of loneliness. Some kind of longing, nostalgic and warm and empty. A gratefulness for all this, and a strange, vague disillusionment he doesn’t feel comfortable extracting. And, of course, the frustration that he can’t form these thoughts into sentences that he or Flynn would understand.

“I mean,” Tron says carefully, “it’s a little... blank. Don’t you think? It’s just—lacking. And I don’t mean that negatively. I’m just... wondering if there’s something else to this?”

Based on the way Flynn’s grin slips a little, it’s obvious that he doesn’t know what Tron’s trying to say, either. But the moment passes quickly—he is, if anything, good at picking through sudden awkward moments—and his grin comes back full force as he says, “Oh, so you think it’s *boring*.”

“Well—yeah. Sure?” If that’s how Flynn makes sense of it. And it’s too late to correct him, even if he could; Flynn’s getting this glimmer in his eye.

“All right, I see how it is. Luckily for you—”

“Oh, no.”

“—I’ve got one more design.” He winks. “And I think you’ll like it.”

That certainly doesn't bode well. But Flynn's attitude is infectious, as always. Tron can't quite hide a smile as he pulls his disc off his back and, with both hands, presents it to him.

Flynn literally turns around once he has Tron's disc. Like, an actual bodily, nonverbal "don't look, it's a surprise!" that makes Tron snort. And it's completely unnecessary—but if there's anything he's learned since this project started, it's that Kevin Flynn revels in the unnecessary.

When he turns back around, his grin is much more controlled. Not that that inspires any more confidence—it's the exact same type of grin Yori would wear right before Tron would walk into his apartment and find that she'd replaced all his furniture with abstract art pieces. (How she'd managed to pull that off so many times, he'll never know.) But Tron still accepts his own disc, clicks it back into place, and lets the code run through his render.

And immediately regrets it.

It's not a *bad* design. No—none of Flynn's ideas of "outfits" has been bad. Tron would even venture to say they've been comfortable in a physical sense. But this.

This.

The *entire* suit is a dark, blushing reddish-pink. It's like Flynn decided to dip him in the old system's code from the neck down and just coat him in the most impractical color possible on this new Grid. And the circuits—they zigzag liberally through the material in this heinous and attention-grabbing way, only stopping to converge at his chest and form that all-important T. He gawks at his own form, at the color hugging him, and looks at Flynn in disbelief.

"Flynn—*what?* What is—why did you—when am I going to wear this?! I can't do anything in this, no one's going to take me seriously! And—oh, my User. Did my circuits just—"

He takes another couple steps in place, and sure enough, his circuits flash an entire spectrum of color with each impact. He watches his circuits strobe through the rainbow, waits for the suit to return to its normal pink configuration, and sighs. “Really?”

Flynn’s smile is all mischief. “What, you don’t like it?” he says, mock hurt in his voice. “Tron. You wound me. Oh—oh! Speaking of wounding people! Check out your disc, man.”

He’s afraid to. But he nevertheless reaches behind himself, takes his disc in hand, and watches the phrase “I FIGHT FOR THE USERS” flash blindingly against that same pink. He doesn’t know what he expected.

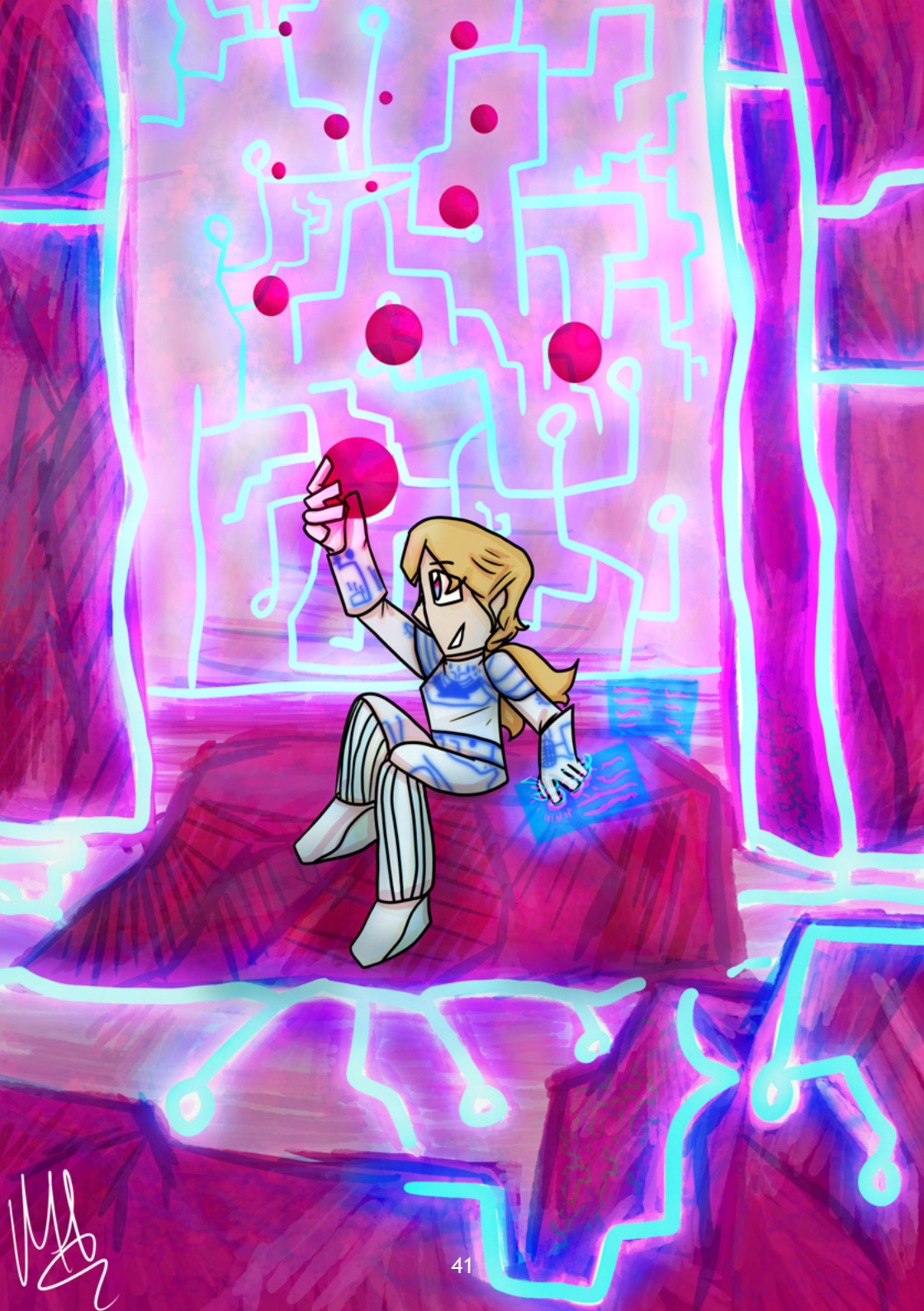
“Flynn,” he says dryly. “I can’t work in this.”

“Hey,” Flynn says, and lets out a hearty laugh. “Who said anything about *working*?” He slings an arm around Tron’s shoulders before he can reply and pulls him to his side, makes him take a step to keep his balance. “We gotta hit the club sometime, man! You’ve got the perfect outfit for it!”

Well. At least Flynn has *some* sense. Tron smiles back at him and sees his own circuits flash colors at the edge of his vision.

He’s still never going to wear this thing again.





SUNRISE

Lora helps Sam break into ENCOM, in the hope he'll find more than what he steals.

@PortalPanda



The sun is beginning to set over Washington D.C.

Pedestrians wander the sidewalks, talking and laughing. Parents guide children through fast-moving crowds. Car horns blare the moment traffic lights turn green. Countless tourists take pictures with monuments they crossed the country or globe to see. Lora hears some of this and imagines the rest as she sits alone in her living room, weighing her phone in her hand.

Technology has changed so much in her lifetime, and humanity has changed with it—just as Dr. Gibbs predicted. Needless to say, computers have always been an important part of Lora's life. Her work at ENCOM made her who she is today, and led her to her family, Gibbs, and Flynn, and Alan. Years later, her work brought her here, to D.C. And in the time since, computers have evolved, and become as central to the rest of the world as they've always been to her. Nearly every person in the country holds the same device she does. Created by the same force that pulled her away, this piece of technology is her main connection to everyone she loves on the other side of the country.

Well. Almost everyone.



“Lora.”

As much as she hates it when Alan and Roy talk like Sam is a

second Kevin Flynn, she can't help but hear the resemblance in his voice. Towards the end, at least, Kevin always sounded tired and bemused in every conversation. As if he were too exhausted to talk, but was too fond of her and Alan to turn them away. That same fondness is in Sam's voice, if a little more wary.

"Hi, Sam." Lora wishes she could see him. Give him a hug or take him out to dinner, just so she knows he's had something to eat. This day hits harder some years than others. "I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

"Never better," Sam says, with the kind of bravado that could be shattered by a breeze.

Lora nods. "I'm glad to hear that." If pretending to be fine is the closest he can get to the real thing, she won't press. It's not like she hasn't been there herself.

She sinks back against the couch cushions.

"I also thought you should know that Alan will be unavailable tonight, so you might want to stay out of trouble if you can help it."

"Aw man, has Alan been spreading lies about me?" Sam asks. "What kind of trouble do you think I get into?"

"I don't ask for details. But you know how he worries."

"Yeah. I do." He has the decency to sound guilty for all of two seconds before he changes the subject. "You're still in D.C., aren't you?"

"That's right."

"So is something happening at ENCOM tonight?"

Sam doesn't quite manage to keep the curiosity from his voice. Lora smiles, though she knows he can't see it.

"Are you suggesting that Alan has no social life?" *Are you suggesting you're interested in ENCOM?*

"No, but thanks for saying it for me."

She sighs in mock disapproval.

"Now that you mention it, I think Alan said that ENCOM OS12 is being released tonight."

Sam whistles. "Sounds fancy."

"Mhm. Out of the three of us, you're probably the only one who can afford it."

"What, no employee discount?"

"There's not even a *student* discount."

The pause on the other end of the call is just long enough that Lora starts to wonder if Sam hung up.

"I bet Alan can't stand that," he mumbles.

You don't sound too happy about it yourself.

She hums. "You know Alan."

"Lora," Sam starts, then stops. "Do you have any idea where this meeting is being held? Like, what floor, specifically? Just in case I really need to find Alan."

"The top floor. That's where most of those fancy board meetings are held."

"Of course. That's the best seat in the house for looking down on the rest of the world." Sam's grumbling is thrown off when Lora starts to snicker. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," she says, examining her nails. "It's just, if I remember correctly, there's a massive server room on that floor, too. If someone managed to sneak past all the suits in that boardroom, they'd have a clear shot at swiping the new OS before it even dropped."

"...Wouldn't *that* be awful."

"Don't worry. Anyone trying to steal ENCOM's rightful, intellectual property would need to know that the data they were looking for was in zone 19. And no one outside of the company has that kind of information."

"Well, that's a relief," Sam says. "You're still making this sound pretty easy, though. You're telling me a big corporation like ENCOM doesn't have any kind of security?"

"Oh, it does. But in my experience, it isn't too hard to work around," Lora grins. Alan would not approve of this conversation, which makes it all the more fun. "OS12 drops at midnight, which means there'll only be the night guard on duty. And he won't be expecting any visitors at that hour. As long as whoever was sneaking around stuck to the stairwells and watched out for cameras, I'd say they wouldn't have too much trouble."

"And if they did run into trouble?"

"They'd have just enough time to see the look on Mackey's face as they passed by the boardroom on their way to the roof."

Sam laughs. "Man, I hope the FBI knows about you."

"I do work for the government," she reminds him. Her voice turns softer when he laughs, and she considers how rare the sound is. "But I'm always here if you need me."

"I know." There's that begrudging fondness again, now more yielding than reluctant. "Thanks, Lora."

"Take care of yourself, Sam."



After Sam hangs up, Lora pours herself a cup of coffee and heads to her apartment's modest balcony, settling into the chair that's squeezed between the wall and the railing.

She admires the sunset as she nurses her drink. The light is fading fast, painting the sky in burning shades of pink and violet. Lora feels a twinge of nostalgia as she remembers another sky like this one, from nearly thirty years ago.

The Great ENCOM Heist of '82—so dubbed by Flynn—started in the middle of the night and didn't end until dawn. The sun was rising by the time their little trio burst out of the old office building. One minute they were giddy with laughter and success, and the next they were yelping and shielding their eyes from the light. Lora clung to Alan's arm with a grip that was equal parts *I can't believe we did that* and *I'll miss you terribly when we get dragged to prison*. Meanwhile, Flynn opted to stare at the sunrise, rambling about colors and darkness and neon with a level of enthusiasm she attributed to adrenaline and sleep deprivation.

Looking back, that was the night the three of them became a family. When they decided to help each other, care for each other, and maybe go to jail for each other. Turns out the old adage is true: friends who commit felonies together stay together. After that night, the three of them were thick as (well) thieves. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for each other.

Lora smiles into her coffee.

Maybe she's getting sentimental in her old age, but something tells her that Sam might have an adventure of his own before the night is over. Breaking into ENCOM seems like a right of passage, and who knows? If he's as lucky as she was, Sam may very well leave the ENCOM Heist of '10 with more than he came there

to steal. Maybe, in the morning, he'll stand under a violet sunrise with some closure, and a new family of his own.

Or maybe he'll accept the one that's already waiting for him.







NOVA

Yori muses over light and darkness on the Grid.

@PortalPanda



“In the beginning there was nothing. And then there was light.”

This is the kind of nonsensical, otherworldly thing that Flynn would say—and Yori swears she hears those words in his voice—but when she opens her eyes he isn’t there.

Nothing is.

All around her is darkness and empty space, just as the voice said. The absolute blankness is beyond her ability to comprehend. Absence stretches infinitely; there is nothing and no one. She is completely alone.

“Yori.”

Tron’s arms wrap around her, solid and warm, and she is safe.

Their suits are still white, and their circuits now match. A soft halo forms around them as they press together, trying to keep the darkness at bay. Shaken as she is, Yori can’t help the laugh that bubbles past her lips.

They are the first sources of light in a new world.



Yori creates the first structure on the Grid. Flynn specifies the measurements, but the design is hers, reminiscent of the ENCOM system.

The tower narrows in sections as it rises from the ground,

lined with blue light and rendered in white that splinters the darkness.

“Incredible.” Flynn’s smile hardly fits on his face as he looks between Yori and her creation. Next to her, Tron radiates [pride]. “Mind if I make one adjustment?”

Flynn touches the nearest wall when Yori nods, and black cascades over white. If possible, his smile grows.

“Now, it’s perfect.”



Yori and Tron aren’t alone for long. Flynn rezzes in every program imaginable—architects, monitors, medics, mechanics—and every one of them is clad in black. This is especially apparent when Yori joins Tron in monitoring the growing city from above.

“Why do you think Flynn made us different?” she asks, watching programs wander the neon-lit streets below. She’s been searching for patterns in the crowds, and this one bothers her. Tron, ever vigilant, only looks up at her long enough to smile.

“We are different.”

“But it’s like he wants them to know.”

“He probably does,” Tron says, exasperated and amused. “Flynn has a strange way of showing affection. I doubt the distinction is bad. His own lightlines are white. He’s sharing that color with us. It’s an honor.”

The circuit on Yori’s arm brightens at his touch, and warmth blooms in her core when she notices how programs look up when they see Tron watching over them. She wonders if they often search for a glint of white in the darkness, if they associate that color with safety, the way that she does.

Maybe the distinction was meant to be a gift, but not for them.

Either way, it is an honor to be linked to Tron.



“It’s like a star,” Flynn breathes, fogging the window with his breath as he stares at the portal.

“A star?” Yori asks, rising from her workstation. Flynn occasionally visits her here to check on the portal and distract her

from her tasks.

“Oh.” He blinks. “Right. Stars... are power sources. The closest star to the user world is called the sun, and it gives us energy and light. Without it, everything would die. We’d be toast,” he smiles, oddly unfazed. “But most stars are far away from our world. We can only see them when it’s dark, at night, and they look like little points of light up in the sky. Sort of like the portal does now.”

Yori’s voice is just above a whisper. “The sun creates life?”
Is that where the Users came from?

“It sustains life,” Flynn says. “Makes life possible.”

“Is it an infinite energy source?”

“No. Pretty much everything in our world has an expiration date. But stars have very long lifespans, especially by user standards. All of us will be gone long before the sun dies. And even now, we can’t see it all the time. It’s only visible for half the, uh, cycle. But it always comes back.”

Yori remembers that conversation every time she looks at the portal— every time a beam of white light shoots into the sky. She operates the *sun*.



“How are stars created?” Yori asks on Flynn’s next visit, trying not to sound overly eager. She knows she shouldn’t question him about the User world, but curiously has been gnawing at her, and at the moment Tron isn’t here to deter her. There’s no time like the present.

“Well,” Flynn says, uncertain, “I’m no astronomer. But space—the, uh, void, where the stars exist—is filled with all kinds of... stuff. Elements. Gases. Debris. And sometimes, when those things get close together, gravity pulls them closer, and they react with each other, and bang!” His arms sweep towards the dark sky of the Grid. “There you have it.”

Yori follows his gaze skyward, though hers travels to the soft light of the portal.

“It’s random?”

“Yeah. Sometimes Users look for patterns in the stars, but they just sort of spring into existence wherever they can,” Flynn says, still looking up. “Wherever the conditions are right.”



If the portal is the sun, the ISOs are stars, points of light that materialize from the darkness of the sea in patterns no one can predict. Flynn calls their existence a miracle.

Yori watches the ISOs rise from the tide, casting dazzling white light into the inky blackness. Tron's arm is around her shoulders, protective, though she knows he's equally mesmerized. Behind her he murmurs something to Flynn, and she listens idly as she searches for constellations in the sea.



Arjia radiates white light. It glows in a way the rest of the Grid does not, putting the cities Flynn and Clu designed to shame. The User delights in the fact. His programs aren't as appreciative.

Yori hears more than one complaint about the color of the city. It's flashy, programs say, *gaudy*. It hurts their eyes. She wonders if Flynn is aware of this, that he's built a world in darkness and now its occupants shun the light he loves so dearly.

For their part, Tron and Yori admire Arjia. It reminds them of home like nothing else on the Grid. The first time they visit, it's like walking through a memory. The place tugs at Yori's core, takes her back to simpler times when she was another version of herself. She couldn't hate it if she tried.

But the complaints against the ISOs and their city grow, and some part of Yori understands those, too.

Afterall, Flynn does not ask the ISOs to change their creation.



Flynn has been gone for cycles, and Yori longs for the return of the portal. She wonders if the Users in their own world ever sit idle and wait for the sun to reappear. Do they fear that it won't come back, when it fades away at the end of the cycle? Do they fear that their world will run out of energy in its absence? That they're all alone— alone in so much darkness?

The Grid continues to change, even without Flynn. He isn't

here to create new programs, but ISOs are born of the sea every cycle. The Basics fear they'll be outnumbered soon, that Flynn will never return, that the Grid will run out of energy. Clu only agitates them further.

Tron stands between two peoples and tries to protect them both, mostly from each other. And all of them, but Yori especially, wait for Flynn to return.

The sky remains dark.



The nicks in Tron's armor are white. Fractures and pixelated gashes glow in the dark, just softer than the light of his circuits. He says they don't hurt, though he shies away from Yori's touch when she finds them.

She stares at the broken lines in Tron's render while he sleeps, and thinks, absently, that they wouldn't be as noticeable if his armor was still white. He changed the color not long ago, saying that the old suit wasn't safe; it drew too much attention. It's better to blend in.

Yori wonders if the other residents of the Grid realize what they've lost yet. She wonders if they'll ever know that they took something that was meant to be a gift and turned it into a weapon.

She holds his hand a little tighter.

According to Flynn, everything and everyone was stardust, once. And since the components of their world come from his, that includes programs. It's easier to see that connection with Tron.

You are made of stars, Yori thinks, and it helps to ease the pain, to tell herself that those cracks are just the starlight seeping through.



Yori is one of very few who now wears white.

Ophelia, the first program to know freedom, wraps herself in the color. For the ISOs, it is a choice to wear the shade of their home, the color that matches the markings on their faces. They make no attempt to hide who or what they are. They display their light, proudly.

The sirens are also rendered in white, by Flynn's design.

This, Yori assumes, is to attract attention—to mark them as Other. For whatever reason, they are further integrated with the Grid than any other programs.

Yori exists in a category all her own. She isn't connected to this system. She certainly isn't *free*. For her, the color is alienating.

She would change it if that wasn't how she felt.



Stars die, Flynn said, in explosions called novas. If they burn so long that they can no longer sustain themselves, stars collapse.

That's what the portal is about to do.

The Grid doesn't have the energy to hold the gateway open any longer, so Yori will end the world in one of two ways. She can close the portal and trap Flynn here forever, or she can leave it open and drown them all in light.

It isn't much of a choice.

There's a final glint of white, and the sun winks out without fanfare, never to return again.

But Yori knows what a nova looks like— what it feels like. Her systems are still ringing from the one that bloomed in her core only micros ago. A connection nearly as old as her existence has been severed irreparably by searing white light. Tron made the same choice she did, the one he didn't have.

She's hardly alone in her grief. Novas occur across the Grid by the millions before the cycle ends. Arjia falls, taking most of the stars with it. Darkness swallows them all.



Somewhere, completely alone, Yori changes her suit to black.





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